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Assembly OKs new school tests

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The performance of Kentucky schools and the progress of their students will be tested in a whole new way by the spring of 2012 if Gov. Steve Beshear signs off on the proposal approved Friday by the General Assembly.

The Commonwealth Accountability Testing System, or CATS, which has measured school performance for more than a decade, would begin being phased out almost immediately.

Senate Bill 1 orders the Kentucky Department of Education to create stronger curriculum standards and a new testing scheme for the 2011-2012 academic year. It also requires elementary and secondary school officials to work with state universities to reduce the number of high school graduates who are unprepared for college-level classes.

"It's an outstanding bill that will make great improvements and will honor the input that we've received from our educators," said Rep. Harry Moberly, D-Richmond.

Starting this spring, students' writing portfolios would no longer be counted in school assessments.

In the springs of 2010 and 2011, students wouldn't be tested in arts and humanities, practical living skills or career studies, as the CATS assessment requires.

They will continue to take the Kentucky Core Content tests in math, reading and science, as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. They will also take the existing social studies exam.

In addition, they will take what Moberly called a "survey norm reference test" in math and reading that will be 45 minutes to an hour long. That test format produces scores to help students better understand their progress and how they compare to peers.

"It will not count as far as (No Child Left Behind) is concerned, but it will give information back to students, parents and teachers," Moberly said. "There is still strong accountability in the interim that will drive good teaching and learning."

That was a major goal of Senate leaders, who have criticized the CATS assessment for not providing helpful information about individual students' performance and progress.

The amount of time teachers will be testing students will drop over the next four years. Testing time will go from 10 days in past years to seven days this spring, six days the following two years and five days starting in 2012, Moberly said.

After days of wrangling, a group of legislators from each chamber agreed about 2 p.m. Friday on the final version of SB 1. Both chambers unanimously approved it hours later.

Republican Sen. Dan Kelly of Springfield, a longtime proponent of changing Kentucky's assessment tools, said the bill would strengthen Kentucky's education system, not weaken it. "This is not the death of reform," Kelly said.

Gov. Steve Beshear also issued a statement praising much of the bill, although he still wants to read it in detail.

"Most significantly, this legislation will create a new system for statewide accountability and assessment that will, for the first time, measure individual student progress over an extended period of time," Beshear said. "That is critically important."

Another sweeping reform in the bill is a requirement that universities work with the Department of Education to develop the new curriculum standards so that elementary and secondary teachers will know how colleges expect them to prepare students. The universities will adjust their introductory course expectations as well, Moberly said.

Within 30 days of enactment of the legislation, university leaders must start meeting with state educators in an effort to reduce the high rate of Kentucky students who must take remedial courses in college.

"I've been talking about that for years. This is the first time I've felt that we passed something that would truly address that," said Moberly, a longtime education reform backer and an administrator at Eastern Kentucky University.

Robert L. King, president of the Council on Postsecondary Education, met with House lawmakers Thursday to help finalize that part of the bill and said the "concept is very strong."

Key Senate leaders, including top ranking Republicans and the Democratic floor leader, were on the negotiating team with a strikingly less experienced group of House members, including five freshmen. Two of the new lawmakers were former principals, one was a veteran school board member and another is a social-studies teacher.

House Speaker Greg Stumbo, D-Prestonsburg, praised their work and said House leaders wanted to "let members who actually had lived through the experience of the testing ... go head to head with those guys, and it worked."

Herald-Leader staff writer Beth Musgrave contributed to this report.